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## Studying Hidden or Hard-to-Access Populations in Case Study Research

*The Example of Labour Migrants*

Refslund, Bjarke

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# **Studying Hidden or Hard-to- Access Populations in Case Study Research: The Example of Labor Migrants**

Contributors: Bjarke Refslund

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## Abstract

When actions are under the influence of different actors and their divergent interests or antagonistic relations, they can be very difficult for researchers to assess. This is because these actions may be hidden or the actors seek to conceal these from the researchers. This is often so for contingent and precarious workers, such as migrant workers. Understanding these relations therefore calls for qualitative research measures such as in-depth case studies to better unravel the relational dynamics. A key methodological issue is how to access a hard-to-reach population and how to get all relevant actors to participate in the research, for example, in interviews. A gatekeeper approach can overcome some of the sampling problems, but there may be other equally relevant solutions. When researching topics characterized by antagonistic relations, where actors may perceive the situation very differently, it is important the researcher seeks to triangulate the data to secure the most valid findings, as some interviewees may not be willing to provide the researchers with the full and objective facts, for instance, on wages and working conditions. Actors may have divergent perspectives on the factual matters or perceive the research as part of a political process, whereby they can further their own agenda.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Identify and understand the dilemmas and trade-offs associated with case study research among hard-to-reach populations
  - Design qualitative studies and select methods that are most likely to produce knowledge on subtle issues such as management decisions in relation to contingent workers like migrants
  - Produce an overall research plan for conducting research among subjects (individuals, decisions, etc.) that are embedded in a specific context, which makes them hard to research
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## Project Initiation and Context

When I initially started my PhD project, I was interested in understanding how globalization, broadly understood, affects a small open economy as Denmark. Reviewing the existing literature, however, I quite quickly reached a first conclusion that much contemporary research on the effects of globalization or internationalization (which most likely is a term that is more fitting) at that point was very macro-oriented and the empirical foundation was very often survey data or other macro data. While these produce relevant insights, I felt that my PhD thesis should be able to produce more on-the-ground, empirical-driven insights.

Faced with this challenge and the need to limit the overall scope of my overall PhD thesis, I decided to select what I deemed to be the most salient dimensions or mechanisms through which “globalization” affected the

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Danish labor market (by focussing on labor markets, I had thereby already excluded the effects on welfare states and economic institutions). These were as follows:

- Capital mobility;
- International price competition;
- Labor migration;
- Discursive impacts.

In my empirical studies, I narrowed this down to investigating offshoring of jobs and production, and more importantly, for this research note, labor migration. While there are official registers, for example, of the number of migrant workers, these are rather inadequate (due, for example, to unreported migrant workers and the high volatility of migrant flows). Furthermore, I wanted to understand the more profound, qualitative changes in the labor market—the increased influx of labor migrants was generating beyond the numerical changes. The register and survey data provide only few insights on this, and data at higher levels of aggregation easily ignore sectoral changes, changes in regulatory practices and institutions, as well as workplace dynamics. Therefore, I needed a more qualitative research approach as well as research design in this phase of my project to scrutinize the dynamics at a more detailed level.

While these first research reflections were part of my PhD project, I have followed up in initial studies of migrant workers in later research projects, in particular in a comparative European project on social dialogue and precarious workers (see Grimshaw, Johnson, Rubery, & Keizer, 2016). The main research this case study discusses, including the interviews with most of the migrant workers, was conducted as part of this later project.

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## Research Design

Based on my initial project considerations, I confined my main enquiry to the effects of labor migration on labor markets. I made a further delimiting choice of including only intra-European labor migration, as this is largest and most prominent group of migrant workers in Denmark. While other groups of workers might be important, this delimitation resulted in the focus being on low-wage work and low-skilled workers—in particular when combined with the sector selection discussed later. Most of these intra-European migrant workers are Eastern and Central Europeans, many are from Romania, Poland, and the Baltic countries (mainly, Lithuania, and to a lesser extent Latvia and Estonia). While labor migration has several positive implications for the Danish labor market, my delimitations and research choices in the design phase meant that the main expected effects on the Danish labor market in my case studies would be averse (see Refslund, 2016a, 2016b and Refslund & Thörnquist, 2016 for further discussion of the factors that shape and explain this).

## Sector Choice

Another important decision in the research design was a sector choice. While there was already quite

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substantial research on intra-European migrant workers in, for example, construction (see, for example, Eldring, Fitzgerald, & Arnholtz, 2012), there are other sectors where labor migration plays an equally important role, but where our knowledge is far more restricted. Through a pre-study mainly based on news reports about migrant workers in different sectors, I chose the less researched sectors that appeared to be most affected. The initial sectors covered were cleaning and agriculture, but later I included migrant workers in transportation, manufacturing (more specifically the fishing and fish-processing industry), and finally, demolition (as a niche of construction that had not been investigated in previous research). As researchers, we often find ourselves in a situation where we aim for generalizability of our findings, or at least some general implications for other cases and/or theory, and this should inform our research design. Nevertheless, there is often a lot learned by looking at sectors, countries, groups of workers, or companies that might at first glance seem like non-typical cases, with less obvious potential for generalizability (however, the non-typical cases can offer a contribution in themselves; Gerring, 2007). These case studies might provide interesting insights and findings. However, it may require additional thinking from the researcher on how dynamics found in the “atypical” case may have relevance in other, more typical settings, thereby also reflecting the limits of generalizability. The atypical cases may, for example, serve as venues for scrutinizing new tendencies, which may affect other sectors or groups of case at a later time, or certain phenomena may be reinforced in the atypical case, thereby making it easier to investigate the specific phenomena. For these reasons, in previous studies, I investigated slaughterhouse workers to produce findings on international outsourcing of relevance for a broader range of industrial workers. Although slaughterhouse work may diverge somewhat from archetypical industrial work, the case still produced interesting results on international outsourcing and what explains it—another example from labor studies is the delightful studies of street musicians by Charles Umney (2016).

## Divergent Interests of Actors

Thus having the overall research design ready, I needed to decide on the methodology. As I wanted to research the migrant workers’ situation at company level to investigate its broader implications, I decided to include interviews in the overall design. The migrant workers were obviously important to include in my interviews. I further decided to interview union officials, because the interactions between unions and migrant workers are important in a high-union density setting like the Danish. Labor migration can be a subtle matter, and significant discussions have arisen on social dumping and exploitation of workers, both in Denmark and at the European level. It is therefore a highly prominent political topic, and as stated by Lillie and Sippola (2011, pp. 294–295) “... [Therefore] interviewees might perceive the research interviews as part of the political game.” This raises important considerations about how to overcome these problems. To what extent can we then trust the statements of, for example, union officials? Or of migrant workers? The best solution to these challenges will be triangulation of methods and data. Therefore, I strongly recommend including as many actors as possible, in particular when antagonistic relations may be present. Although the Danish labor market is characterized by consensual relations, this rests upon an acknowledgment of the divergent interests of the labor market partners (Andersen, Dølvik, & Ibsen, 2014). So, in the particular studies, I tried to get access to

company owners, human resource (HR) managers, and so on to determine their understanding of the topics. This is particularly important as I selected several case companies *because* they encountered some of the problems anticipated when hiring migrant workers, such as low wages, and therefore should be able to give their perspective. Onsite observations by the researcher are a further important means to collect more data and better understand the context of the study. I did some on-site observations in one of the factories, and one of the union officials gave me a shorter tour of the local areas where the fish-processing factories are located. However, there may be ethical issues related to this, particularly if the researcher becomes too embedded in her or his research object or field and risks ending up with a one-sided perspective. For instance, in cases where it is comparatively easier to get access to the union and migrant workers, there is a risk of placing too much emphasis on their perspective over and against that of the employers.

While data triangulation of findings is something all studies ideally should strive for to strengthen the validity of the findings, it remains particularly important in studies such as these, where there may be a bias of interviewees to give a certain impression to further their own course.

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## Research Practicalities—Finding and Interviewing Migrant Workers

Because migrant workers are “moving targets,” so to speak, often with short-term stays in the host country, it can be quite difficult to recruit them for interviews. Previous research on migrant workers has often used “snowballing” techniques (where one respondent suggests or recruits the next, and so on) or “respondent-driven sampling” methods (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004) to recruit migrant workers. While this has worked very well with migrant workers in the Nordic countries (Arnholtz & Hansen, 2013; Friberg & Tyldum, 2007), it has limits, for instance, when the population is within the same company with a limited number of workers, as in my case study. Besides, my study did not aim to recruit many or all the migrant workers in the case companies. Rather the goal was to provide insights about migrants’ interaction with the union and the migrants’ general working conditions in the case companies. I therefore chose to approach the unions as gatekeepers; they then helped me recruit my respondents among the migrant workers. While there may be drawbacks and potential biases linked with this approach (e.g., only getting respondents that are overly positive about the union), I decided that this would be the best solution in my design, because I was also interested in the interaction between the union and the migrant workers.

## Union Meetings as Group Interviews—A Pragmatic Yet Fruitful Solution

Because of very busy union organizers, it turned out to be difficult to get appointments with interviewees. As it was already difficult for the union to get the migrant workers to join meetings, there were many ad hoc meetings—for instance, migrant workers just stopped by the union headquarters, often in a group. This could make it problematic to set up extra meetings. Neither the migrant workers nor the union organizers had much time to allocate to interviews, and it could be challenging to motivate the migrant workers to participate in the interviews. We therefore decided that I could join some of the meetings the unions already had planned

with the migrant workers, and I would then have a chance to ask questions and interview groups of workers as well as individual workers. Had the research design emphasized interviewing individual workers, this would probably not have been the best solution. Nonetheless, the interviews/union meetings with the migrant workers, although rather chaotic, turned out very helpful and in the end added substantially to the research findings. In addition, there were migrant workers at the meetings who were not union members, and the chance to observe the meetings gave me some excellent insights into the dynamic interaction between union organizers and the migrant workers. Therefore, observing the meetings and asking questions there, in combination with more traditional interviews, actually gave me a better understanding of the interaction between the union and the migrant workers than traditional interviews would have.

## Covering All Actors—Reluctant Employers

Seeking to cover all relevant actors in the interviews was a top priority in the practical phase of the project. This was particularly important for two reasons: first, triangulating the results was a key element in the overall research design; second (and partly following from the first), interview participants may perceive the research as part of a broader political agenda, whereby they aim for furthering their own perspective rather than providing the interviewers with the full, more balanced, story. This meant, in my concrete case studies, that interviews with management in the involved companies would be important to validate (or call into question) the information collected in the interviews with the workers and the union representatives. This, however, presented some significant challenges and some ethical considerations as well. Since the case companies were selected because they were facing challenges with migrant workers, managers were well aware of this situation, and both case companies had experienced negative media attention, which made them reluctant to participate. One company did not respond at all to my email inquiries (I probably should have called them instead), whereas another company in the same sector, not facing any such issues, was happy to participate in interviews. This required that I alter my strategy in the other case company to get interviews with the management. By chance, I happened to know the HR manager of this specific company privately. However, this turned out to be a bit problematic, as the information he gave me on wages, working conditions, and the corporation with the union was later disproved by other interviewees, media reports, and not least importantly in the labor court ruling. In particular, the latter is a very valid source, as the labor court must have substantial facts on which to base its ruling. The labor court found the factual setting to be almost identical with the statements of the migrant workers. This therefore provides a strong argument against the interview data of the HR manager. However, not all cases are that clear. Generally, this raised some ethical concerns about the integrity of the personal connection, which was more problematic than if it had been a purely professional relation between a researcher and an interviewee. This suggests that drawing on personal relations in delicate research matters is not necessarily a good solution.

This final example quite neatly illustrates the ethical considerations that can be associated with this kind of research, in particular when dealing with delicate issue, such as working conditions for precarious workers, which the company and management may want to conceal or at least blur.

## Method in Action

Having a solid research design is one thing, but turning it into good research is yet another thing, particularly in a vibrant setting, where things can change quite rapidly. Some of the migrant workers, for instance, were fired in one case company during my research, mainly owing to their engagement with the union. Nonetheless, the case studies turned out rather well, and I tried to utilize the vibrant setting. For instance, the group interviews that were conducted during a union meeting provided me with some valuable insights. The workers were informed about the group interview and that I would be asking questions; however, as they had many questions and topics they wanted to raise with the union officials, it is not always possible to make sharp distinctions between the interview and the meeting itself. This again illustrates the need for researchers to be able to adapt to the changing context of such studies.

Structured interviews can be difficult to carry out in the context described, where the union leaders have difficulties in getting the migrant workers to attend meetings, let alone participate in interviews. Furthermore, the complexity and interrelation of the topics makes structured interview guides less relevant. Therefore, given that the overall aim of my research was a qualitative enquiry, I decide to use a semi-structured interview guide, with a list of questions and topics to be covered, and which afforded the ability to adapt the interview and go back and forth between topics when suitable. This turned out to be a very good strategy, as the migrant workers in the meetings (and also in the interviews) would raise various concerns and jump between topics. Particularly in the group interviews, this proved important as several respondents would sometimes talk at the same time, trying to raise different issues, and some were addressing me while others were addressing the union organizer present at the meeting. Furthermore, some of the interviewees did not speak English (which was the language of the interviews), so other group members had to translate their answers and contributions, which also caused some discussion internally among the migrant workers, when they did not agree on the topic. Obviously, this also presents the researcher with some ethical considerations on how to handle this. Most of the internal discussion was not so much about factual matters, but rather the assessment of statements. I tried to deduce my general assessment based on the inputs from the migrants, but also took notice of when they disagreed about issues and tried to ask further questions to clarify when there was disagreement. Owing to these factors, it is salient that the researcher can adapt questions and terminology so as to resonate with the lived reality of the interviewees. Also, efforts to test and verify statements are important—sometimes, the migrants may misunderstand the question or something is lost in translation. Particularly important topics must be addressed from different angles, and the questions should be asked in different wordings or more directly, until the researcher feels confident that the questions have been fully understood.

Hence, the overall ability to adapt to the context was an important prerequisite for this research. I conducted an informal interview that gave me very rich data while driving to an interview site with a Romanian union translator. The informal setting in the car provided a perfect setting for having a trustful conversation, also creating an opening for some critique of the union and its organizing strategy. Because it was never intended



to be a formal interview, I did not tell her initially that it was an interview. Nevertheless, when I asked her at the end of the car ride, she agreed that I could use the information in my project. She was very passionate about the topic of integrating migrants in the union and later started working for the union, so I am convinced we would have had the conversation regardless of the project. She would most likely have restated the same in a new interview situation. That aside, handling information gathered in an informal setting or context raises some ethical concerns for researchers, for instance when meeting interviewees by chance in another setting. I would argue that this information cannot be ignored and must be taken into account for the general findings; it should be treated like other data, albeit with due consideration for the ethical dimensions. This would mean not taking advantage of the interviewees being in vulnerable or unexpected situations, and not sharing one's insights gained thereby without first obtaining the consent of the interviewees. But I think the latter is a prerequisite for gaining confidentiality, through promising the interviewees anonymity, especially when it relates to interviewees in a vulnerable position, such as where they may risk losing their job or experiencing other types of employer retaliation. Hence, the ability to be flexible in the data collection proved important. However, this also had some drawbacks, chiefly that I did not have the chance to record the "interview" due to its informal character, so that I had to rely on writing research notes afterward. This does challenge the validity of the findings somewhat, as readers must rely on my interpretation because no recordings are available.

Migrant workers are often in a vulnerable and contingent position, where they fear employer retaliation for engaging with the union or media—and they find it difficult to distinguish between researchers, authorities, and other groups. Therefore, they often feel more comfortable not being recorded during an interview. In general, it is important to create a relaxed and trustful setting when interviewing migrant workers. This also applies to the researcher's physical appearance; for instance, when interviewing construction workers in a construction site, wearing a tie and jacket does not promote confidentiality with the migrant workers.

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## Practical Lessons Learned

When doing research in fields with subtle, disputed processes or vulnerable actors such as migrant workers, there are a number of issues one should pay attention to. In a context involving complex relations and settings, or disputed decision-making, to rely solely on survey methods or register data will provide only limited information. Whereas quantitative data can provide important information and supplement other findings, qualitative research methods such as interviews and workplace observations can provide richer insights. However, the selection of interviewees is crucial. In particular, with precarious groups, it can be difficult to sample or select the right respondents. Respondent-driven sampling or snowballing is one alternative, and another is utilizing a gatekeeper. In every research project, the researcher needs to think carefully about the advantages and disadvantages of the different methodological choices made to obtain access to, and information from, respondents. Furthermore, researchers need to be open to adapting their design and approach to the specific real-life settings, which are often highly dynamic, and should seize the opportunities that arise during the research project—for example, for more informal dialogue with interviewees.

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As with all other types of research, we need, as researchers, to think carefully about the validity and reliability of our data. For this study, this meant carefully assessing the interview data, and in particular, questioning the validity of the information given by interviewees, who may wish to further a specific agenda and who may perceive the research as part of a political game. Unions, for instance, may be hoping for tightened regulations in response to malpractices by employers, and the union representatives may therefore overestimate the problems in giving interviews. Therefore, when doing research where the actors may hold antagonistic views, triangulating the data and seeking to validate the results are of utmost importance. In my case studies, the migrant workers gave examples of precarious and even abusive working conditions (e.g., violence). But when the other party in the quarrel does not want to participate in the research project, as with one of my case companies, or provides a contradicting view, as did another company, this presents a problem. Although researchers can present data directly from only one source such as migrant workers, in particular emphasizing their perceptions, the findings become more valid when verified by other sources. In my cases, this would be other interviewees in the same business and local environment, media reports, researcher observations on site, and Labor Court rulings and other official administrative documents.

Some of the same issues and considerations apply to other research topics where there can be a conflict of interest, especially when including asymmetrical power relations. Examples could include contingent workers (such as migrants, home workers, seasonal workers, and workers in the “gig economy” such as freelancers), but the same applies to organizations with asymmetrical power relations, for example, suppliers and buyers or regulators (both private and public) and the regulated organizations.

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## Conclusion

Producing knowledge with a real and direct impact on society should be the goal of research, also when dealing with difficult topics such as “hidden” populations (e.g., precarious workers). This research case study has discussed various methodological challenges and trade-offs when investigating hard-to-reach actors. This included the sampling strategy whereby various solutions were discussed; for my own empirical application, a gatekeeper approach was chosen: the local union was approached and acted as a gatekeeper, providing access to migrant workers. While there obviously are potential drawbacks to this approach, such as only recruiting interviewees with a certain perspective, this can be mitigated by triangulating the data to the extent possible. In practice, this means ensuring the inclusion of multiple perspectives, which is especially important when dealing with disputed research topics, where actors may disagree on the factual state-of-affairs and furthermore potentially see the research as part of a political “game” within which to further their own agenda. This makes triangulation of data highly relevant in cases with subtle and precarious issues. Nonetheless, business and management studies should engage to a greater degree with such “difficult” on-the-ground issues as labor migration and other contingent workers, as well as other potentially conflictual issues such as general management/employee relations and contractor/supplier relations, and disputed decision-making like plant closure, outsourcing, and staff reduction. It is important that we not shy away from these topics due to the difficulties encountered. Rather, we must strive for solid and valid research and seek to

triangulate the findings as much as possible through not only interviewees but also researcher observations, media reports, court rulings, and other sources.

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## Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. List the different data sources for investigating the topics discussed in the article. For each data source, list the associated pros and cons.
  2. Why is triangulation of sources especially important in the type of research described here?
  3. Discuss strategies for how we, as researchers, verify statements of interviewees and informants—in particular, if there are contradicting statements?
  4. The text mentions different approaches for getting access to “hidden-populations”—in this example, migrant workers. These include snowballing, personal networks, and gatekeepers. For each approach, discuss the potential benefits and risks.
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## Further Reading

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